9. Citizen involvement in subnational governance: innovations, trends and questions

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Introduction

Elsewhere in this book, the changing context of local and regional governance has been described from a financial, economic and spatial perspective. Taking a financial and economic perspective in particular, a story of growth and decline unfolds, with the global financial and economic crisis of 2007–08 as a dramatic turning point. The picture is different, however, when we look at the development of initiatives for involving citizens in local and regional democracies, as we do in this chapter. A lot of experimentation in this field tends to be at the local and regional levels since these are considered the more accessible levels of government, where issues of scale are less impeding to public involvement.

The general trend in this field is one of steady expansion. This does not mean, however, that representative democracy has been increasingly supplanted by citizen-led government. What we see is much more a process of addition, hybridization and mixing rather than one of replacement (Rosanvallon 2008; Hendriks 2019; Elstub and Escobar 2019). If anything, the years 2007–08 mark an acceleration of this trend, partly because financial cutbacks and austerity programmes stimulated the already existing quest for 'less government spending' and more 'governance' solutions with greater societal and citizen participation (Rhodes 1996; Stoker 2011). The same years also saw the breakthrough of smartphone and smart device technology, building on the massive uptake of broadband internet, which gave renewed impetus to participatory initiatives.

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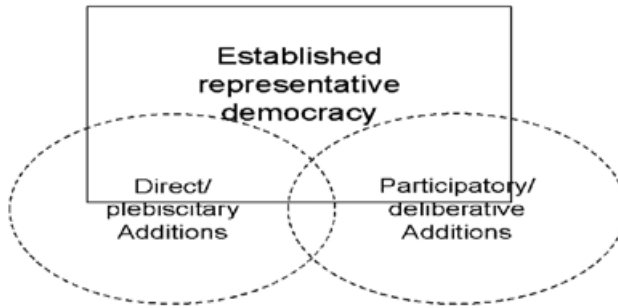
Figure 9.1   Additions to representative democracy in subnational governance

In this chapter, we investigate citizen involvement in subnational governance in two broad areas. Firstly, we look at the area that falls under the rubric of participatory and deliberative democracy. Since the seminal work of Carole Pateman (1970) put participatory democracy on the map, it has been associated with the mobilization and coordination of collective direct action for some common purpose. Originally more action-oriented, participatory democracy has taken a more reflection-oriented turn since the early 1990s – the so-called 'deliberative turn' (Mutz 2006; Goodin 2010). The earlier participatory democracy and the later deliberative democracy both take an integrative, non-majoritarian approach to public decision-making and public involvement.

Second, we examine initiatives that take an emphatically aggregative and majoritarian approach to citizen involvement, pushing a range of direct and plebiscitary additions to representative democracy at the local and regional level (Schiller 2017; Hendriks 2020) (see Figure 9.1). In the following pages we first discuss this second area, focused on the counting and the competition of votes, after which we look at the deliberative and participatory initiatives to public involvement. In a final section, we discuss future research avenues.

Direct and plebiscitary democracy

Formal referendums and initiatives

Direct democracy at the local and regional levels has not changed dramatically since the financial and economic crisis of 2007–08. Larger changes were noted in the 1990s, when most notably German *Länder* and towns embraced more

encompassing and binding provisions for referendums – provisions that were actually and increasingly used (Kampwirth 2004; Geissel 2016). Just one, very prominent, example was the binding referendum in Baden-Württemberg in November 2011 concerning the railway station project Stuttgart 21. In the 1990s, following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism, eastern European countries developed institutions that also often allowed for subnational referendums, which were on the whole less used by mobilizing citizens than the newly created provisions at the subnational level. Together with Switzerland, Austria and Slovenia, Germany is now part of a small group of European countries with subnational governance systems in which the binding referendum as well as direct legislation based on citizens' initiatives are not only institutionally entrenched but also frequently used in line with fairly feasible requirements (Schiller 2017; Hendriks et al. 2011: 734).[1] In other European countries – such as the Netherlands, Denmark, Italy and the Czech Republic – the local referendum has become a relatively common, moderately used instrument of public involvement, mostly in a non-binding (advisory) and government-initiated (consultative) way. One example is the consultative referendum held in October 2009 in Antwerp, Belgium about a possible ring road: though formally non-binding, the majority no-vote resulted in the effective shelving of the plans.

Referendums and initiatives for direct voting at the subnational level differ in many design variables and technical requirements, but they generally have one thing in common: a focus on binary choices, between yes or no, for or against some proposition. In a few towns and regions, non-binary or multi-option direct voting has been tried. The Dutch town of Arnhem, for instance, has experimented with a 'preferendum', giving voters multiple options to order by preference. The Swiss canton of Bern has developed a 'constructive-veto' referendum provision, which means that voters can indicate their relative preference for three options: the initial government proposition, a civic counter-proposal and the status quo as default. A simple binary choice for or against government policy is being corrected in this way.

New plebiscitary practices

Formal voter initiatives and referendums form a comparatively stable, incrementally developing constellation of practices, in contrast to the more dynamic and expanding new plebiscitary democracy which is reinventing direct voting. The massive uptake of broadband internet and smart devices in the early 2000s has contributed to a rapid proliferation of these new plebiscitary initiatives, including at the subnational level. In various formats such as 'clicks', 'checks', 'likes', 'thumbs-up/down' and other signs of approval or disapproval by

citizens and groups are rapidly aggregated and calculated with twenty-first century technology. The new plebiscitary formats can be subdivided into society-initiated and system-initiated versions (Halupka 2014; Hendriks 2020).

One of the many examples of a society-initiated format is 'Frankfurt Gestalten', an internet platform founded in 2010 to allow citizens of the German city of Frankfurt not only to propose action, but also to support propositions by digital mouse clicks. A peer-to-peer, citizen-to-citizen initiative, its slogan is '*Bürger Machen Stadt*' ('Citizens Make the City'). Interestingly, the municipality of Frankfurt has developed its own digital platform that is system-initiated: 'Frankfurt Fragt Mich' ('Frankfurt Asks Me'). Related YouTube clips suggest how citizens can formulate propositions ('*Ich will …*' – 'I want …') and how the digital tally may directly start counting. The mayor of Frankfurt explains in these clips: 'You have an idea, and if it gets more than 200 supporters, it will become our assignment'.[2]

Similar platforms abound nowadays, with institutional robustness, usage and impact strongly varying (as with all formats of public involvement). One of the more successful digital platforms – in terms of uptake – can be found in the Spanish capital Madrid. 'Decide Madrid' is now formally hosted by the municipality of Madrid, but was originally proposed by 'Ahora Madrid', a system-challenging citizen platform and temporary coalition of political movements rallying in the local elections in 2015. Manuele Carmena, who ran on this platform, became the new mayor and committed to implementing Decide Madrid. The most consequential parts of this platform operationalize digital voting procedures in which citizens and groups can formulate propositions, collect and amass support and, depending on the size of support, can receive formal approval for those propositions. In 2017, for instance, the proposals 'Madrid 100% sustainable' and 'Single ticket for public transport' were agreed by the city council as the initiators had surpassed the required support threshold (1 per cent of residents over 16 years old). The city and its apparatus can also use the system for specific implementation polls and more general opinion polls.

Decide Madrid also facilitates an ideas contest in the context of participatory budgeting. This means that residents can propose different investment projects, for which citizens can then digitally vote, with the most supported ultimately proceeding. A similar logic applied to the 'City Initiatives' competition that Rotterdam organized for a number of years. Details aside, the various new voting initiatives share a focus on competition, mass and quantity of individual mostly digitally expressed choices, which are then aggregated into a collective public signal (Hendriks 2020). As such, they mimic and reformulate the logic

and language of formal referendums and initiatives previously described, while significantly diverging from the type of public involvement that fits the participatory and deliberative additions discussed in the following section.

Participatory and deliberative democracy

This section presents recent developments in participatory and deliberative complements to representative democracy, focusing particularly on developments in European subnational democracy. Participatory and deliberative initiatives manifest themselves in many forms which can be placed in three broad categories, depending on the relationship with the institutions of representative democracy. The first contains participatory and deliberative initiatives where directly elected representatives and citizens closely cooperate in preparing or implementing policy. The second is the most extensive group and encompasses all participatory and deliberative initiatives that are more loosely connected to political decision-making and policymaking by the institutions of representative democracy. This category includes both examples of participatory and of deliberative democracy. And the third category concerns participatory bottom-up citizens' initiatives, with an even more distant role for the institutions of representative democracy. Only the third category of initiatives shows an acceleration of the trend since 2008, partly because of financial cutbacks and austerity programmes. The other categories include either recent initiatives (category 1) or a steady expansion of initiatives (category 2).

Initiatives closely connected to representative democracy

Characteristic of the initiatives in this category is that there is one participatory and deliberative forum in which citizens and elected politicians closely interact to create policy jointly and formulate together solutions to policy problems, which will then become part of the decision-making processes of representative democratic institutions. These initiatives merge existing forms of representative democracy with forms of deliberative and participatory democracy, while the final decision-making power remains with politicians. The deliberative dimension of these forms focuses on enhancing dialogue, whereas the participatory dimension focuses on giving citizens a say in policymaking. The close cooperation between citizens and elected politicians aims at increasing the democratic legitimacy of these bodies and, as such, tries to address the problems that many participatory and deliberative forums face, such as a lack of influence on decision-making.

This type of forum is relatively new and there are only a few examples to be found at the municipal and regional levels in Europe. Among the best-described examples are the initiatives of what the authors call 'hybrid democracy' in the municipalities of Gentofte in Denmark and Svelvik in Norway (Sørensen and Torfing 2019). Elected politicians decided to provide the city council with collaborative arenas in which politicians and local citizens work together to solve the most pressing problems confronting the community. A similar example is the experiment with the cooperative neighbourhood council Oosterparkwijk in the Dutch city of Groningen where a collaborative neighbourhood council of citizens and elected politicians together advised on and contributed to policies that affect the neighbourhood (Westerweel 2020).

Other examples in this category concern issues of climate adaptation, energy efficiency and renewable energy, such as the summit on climate adaptation in Kalundborg in Denmark (Bedsted and Gram 2013). This involved citizens, stakeholders and local politicians in debates on three scenarios for local climate adaptation. The outcomes were used by the local politicians to change local planning. Other examples are the Green Community Strategy in the region of Madonie in Italy (www.greencommunities.it), the working groups on energy efficiency in Plymouth, United Kingdom (UK) (Williams 2019), and the Rõuge Energy Strategy 2020 in Rõuge municipality, Estonia (ENLARGE 2018).

Initiatives more loosely connected to representative democracy

In response to an actual or perceived decline in legitimacy of the political system, politicians and public officials often search for new ways to involve citizens and organizations more directly in policymaking (Torfing and Triantafillou 2011; Cain et al. 2006) and to develop in an innovative way the existing forms of representative democracy (Grönlund et al. 2014; Smith 2009).

Compared to the initiatives in the first category, the initiatives in this category are characterized by a looser connection to decision-making by the institutions of representative democracy. At the local and regional levels, we can find both examples of participatory democratic initiatives and deliberative democratic initiatives. Although the difference between these two might be fluid in practice, participatory democratic initiatives focus on involving citizens in policymaking whereas deliberative democratic initiatives focus on enhancing dialogue.

Looking back at recent decades of *participatory developments*, the conclusion is that participation in policymaking has grown, and the diversity of participatory forms has increased as well as the issues that are subject to participatory

involvement (Fung 2015). Among this diverse group of participatory initiatives (https://participedia.net/) are age-related forums, such as youth councils or councils for the elderly, expert councils, advisory committees, participatory budgeting (Sintomer et al. 2016) and forms of interactive policymaking and co-production (Bovaird 2007). At the same time, referring to the well-known 'ladder of participation' by Arnstein (1969), most participatory initiatives are best understood as forms of consultation. Less often, citizens and public officials cooperate through forms of co-governance and multi-actor collaboration which give citizens and other stakeholders a more decisive role coming close to the first category (initiatives closely connected to representative democracy).

A relatively new development is that new ways of involving citizens by using digital tools are becoming more common. For example, in Deurne, a district of the city of Antwerp, Belgium, residents are asked to report problems in the public domain and propose solutions as to how the government could improve local living conditions (Thijssen and Van Dooren 2016). Other cities use digital tools as part of a larger participatory process. For example, in Melbourne, Australia, traditional methods of participation were combined with electronic forms; through online consultation of citizens and the use of a Wiki forum to provide opportunities for citizens to comment on the draft strategic plan for the future of the city of Melbourne (Van Hulst et al. 2017).

The rise of *deliberative democratic initiatives* over the last 20 to 30 years is closely related to the deliberative turn in democratic theory (Dryzek 2000; Steiner 2012). Deliberative democracy adds to both representative democracy and direct democracy. To deliberative democrats, it is not enough to have free and fair elections – although this is an important precondition – they want to enrich this process of governance with deliberative elements as well. A branch of deliberative democrats would applaud the influence of citizens that stems from direct democracy, but only if the public debate in the run-up to a referendum is characterized by high-quality deliberation (Gastil and Richards 2013).

In recent decades, so-called 'mini-publics' have been organized especially at the local level in an attempt to renew policymaking and democracy (Grönlund et al. 2014). There is a broad variety of both forms and subjects of mini-publics. Examples of mini-publics at the local and regional level that have been organized in the last decade are: citizens' juries on health inequalities (for example in Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow; http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/), citizens' forums on the future of cities (for example Amersfoort and other cities in the Netherlands; Michels 2019) or regions (for example the German-speaking part of Belgium, Ostbelgien; Reuchamps 2020), deliberative forums on the use of nuclear power (for example in Turku in Finland; Himmelroos and

Christensen 2014), and citizens' forums on improving biking infrastructure (such as in various German cities). What they have in common is that the selection of the participants is often based on sortition, giving each member of the community an equal chance to be selected. In addition, deliberation forms the core of the process of how proposals are developed by mini-publics. Instead of political or socio-economic power, it is the power of ideas and arguments that counts, as well as the willingness to be convinced by others.

Because of the loose relation with traditional politics and decision-making, which is even stronger for the deliberative democratic initiatives than for most participatory forms, there is a serious risk that, while participants feel empowered *during* the process, the lack of actual influence on final policy-making would make this sense of empowerment short-lived, which could lead to citizens deciding not to take part in future projects (Raisio and Ehrström 2017). Moreover, the loose relationship with representative democracy provides opportunities for politicians to pay nothing more than lip service to the outcome of participation.

Bottom-up citizens' initiatives with a distant role for representative democracy

In the last decade, there have been a growing number of initiatives taken by citizens aimed at empowering communities and performing public tasks formerly carried out by the government. Some developments have contributed to the growth of these bottom-up initiatives. First, in response to the financial crisis in 2008, local governments in western Europe had to adopt austerity measures that affected public services and provision. Austerity measures at the local level forced or encouraged citizens to take over some public tasks and to formulate ideas on how to retain a liveable and safe neighbourhood or city. The then popular ideology of the 'Big Society' supported the idea of encouraging people to take an active role in their communities and of transferring power to the local level. The ideology of the Big Society draws heavily on ideas of communitarism (Blond 2010; Etzioni 1997) and became central to the 2010 UK Conservative Party manifesto and later to the government programme of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. Although the ideas of the Big Society were criticized for being intended primarily as a mechanism to implement financial cuts, similar ways of thinking also became popular in other European countries. Second, governments have become increasingly aware that technological and societal innovations are needed to contribute to greater sustainability, economic prosperity and well-being. But often, governments lack the expertise and knowledge that well-educated citizens, expertise centres and local small businesses do have. One example is the sustainable

energy sector, where citizens increasingly take the initiative to establish decentralized local forms of energy production, as in the province of Friesland, the region in the Netherlands with the most local energy cooperatives. And, finally, citizens often feel limited by bureaucratic rules which results in support for self-governance and a 'do-it-yourself' attitude.

An evaluation of the Big Society approach showed that, with some positive exceptions, it failed to reach its goals (Civil Exchange 2015). One of the main criticisms is that British society actually became more divided than ever. Nevertheless, this trend of giving more power to the people is irreversible. Giving more power to citizens and neighbourhoods also became popular in other countries. In the Netherlands, the policy programme 'Do-it-yourself democracy', launched by the Liberal-Social Democratic Rutte government in 2013, encouraged experiments in neighbourhoods where people would help each other in making the neighbourhood more safe, in finding a job, in raising their children or organizing events for young people.

Another example is the Right to Challenge, which again was first introduced in Britain as part of the 2011 Localism Act. The Right to Challenge allows alternative suppliers to challenge a municipality on the basis that they could provide services better or more cheaply than the incumbent provider (Ferry et al. 2015: 355). Again the idea is to give people and communities more influence. The community Right to Challenge applies to all relevant local government services, including, for example, local planning issues and youth justice services. There are strict rules that have to be followed before a group of citizens will be able to win the contract: citizens need to have established an organization, there must be a strong business case, a clear expression of interest, and finally a bid which may, then, compete with other (professional) organizations. After an organization has won the challenge, they receive the financial resources to perform the public task.

One example is Bulky Bob's, a social enterprise in Liverpool, UK, which is a free bulky item collection and recycling service for Liverpool residents. Other examples are the Millmead Children's Centre in Margate, UK, and the Holy Cross Centre Trust, a day care centre for mentally ill people in Camden, London. It is difficult, however, to find many examples of *successful* challenges. The main barriers are the strict rules, the lack of information among the citizens who challenge, and the skills and expertise that are needed to make a strong business case. In other countries, such as the Netherlands, there have been experiments with a more loose and less strict version of the Right to Challenge in a number of cities in the areas of health, youth, elderly care and social support. Some examples are 'Wijkbedrijf Selwerd' in Groningen,

which offers jobs for vulnerable and socially excluded people, and BOSS in Eindhoven which supports outdoor activities for vulnerable young people.

In addition, there are many other initiatives that are initiated by citizens which do not need any support, or start as a small initiative and only later seek (financial and regulatory) support from the government.

Interesting avenues for future research

Reviewing the development of direct and plebiscitary initiatives and participatory and deliberative initiatives for citizen involvement, 2008 does not appear to be a dramatic turning point. The general trend is one of steady expansion and a broadening of initiatives that supplement representative democracy. If we compare 2020 with 2008, there are, however, some observations to make, which may lead to interesting avenues for future research.

The first relates to the ever-expanding number and variety of citizen-involvement initiatives. Mostly, it is the local government that pushes initiatives. Although the name might suggest differently, bottom-up citizens' initiatives are often strongly encouraged by local governments themselves. This raises the question to what extent, why and how the people themselves desire to have a greater voice in policymaking. Previous research on the national level suggests that citizens may have very different conceptions of the most desired form of democracy (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001; Rojon 2020; Bengtsson and Mattila 2009; Coffé and Michels 2014). Also, an investigation of democratic innovation experiments in Dutch municipalities showed that even the designers of these innovations, such as politicians, decision-makers and civil servants, do not have a coherent philosophy with regard to the contributions that such innovations can make to local democracy (Binnema et al. 2020). Related to this are the questions of whether citizens desire to have more bottom-up (society-led) initiatives, or do they want to see the government more in control in the form of top-down (government-hosted) initiatives? These questions open up a new line of enquiry into the wishes of citizens and stakeholders and a critical analysis of the assumptions that often lay behind the choice for particular democratic innovations.

A second observation is that these direct, plebiscitary, participatory and deliberative innovations may not replace existing democracy, but do potentially change how it works and thus also trigger fundamental questions about democratic rule. For example, many people may not feel represented by the

institutions of representative democracy, and may desire more inclusion. But how inclusive are participatory forums and other democratic innovations in practice? In short, to what extent are democratic institutions – including the additions discussed here – able to realize democratic goods or values (Smith 2009; Michels 2011) or democratic functions (Jäske and Setälä 2019; Warren 2017). Or, to put it differently, what is the impact of such mechanisms in terms of inclusion, deliberation, policy influence and quality of decision-making? One of the most challenging questions relates to democratic legitimacy. In particular, participatory and deliberative initiatives often involve only a small section of the population. This raises questions about the democratic legitimacy of these initiatives. As a consequence, and this is a second promising avenue for future research, both academics and practitioners at subnational level are exploring how combinations of instruments might strengthen democratic legitimacy. One example are the forums as described by Sørensen and Torfing (2019) in which citizens and elected politicians closely interact to co-create policy and formulate joint solutions to policy problems, which will then become part of the decision-making process. This form of 'hybrid democracy' combines representative democracy and participatory/deliberative democracy by creating one forum. Following the example of the Irish national citizens' assembly on abortion in Ireland in 2016 which paved the way for a referendum on this topic and a new law presented to parliament (Suiter 2018), others are pursuing hybrid forms that combine deliberation with forms of direct democracy, and thus strengthening public support and democratic legitimacy (Hendriks 2019).

A third observation is that we find these initiatives to further citizen involvement both in consensus democracies (such as the Netherlands) and in majoritarian democracies (the UK). This raises relevant questions about the relationship between the subnational political context and the choice for and working of these additions to representative democracy. To put it briefly, do forms of participation and deliberation work better in subnational consensus systems which are already characterized by integrative and interactive ways of dealing with political issues? And are plebiscitary aggregative forms more suitable for majoritarian subnational political systems where decision-making by the majority is the rule (Hendriks and Michels 2011)? These and related questions seek to understand the working of citizen-involvement initiatives in relation to their political institutional context in order to develop a broader theoretical understanding of subnational democratic innovations.

Fourth, and finally, we mentioned that new ways of involving citizens by using digital tools are becoming more common in direct and plebiscitary as well as participatory and deliberative initiatives. At the same time, the use

of these tools seems to be in a continuously experimental and early state of institutionalization. Digitalization promotes a new plebiscitary democracy in many places, but this is far from a stabilized or institutionally entrenched phenomenon (Hendriks 2020). In participatory and deliberative initiatives, face-to-face contact is still the norm. However, this may very well be going to change quickly. With the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, many organizations appeared to be capable of switching almost immediately to the use of online tools to reach out to clients, colleagues and students. And, relating to the subject of this chapter, a deliberative mini-public in the city of Turku/Åbo in Finland (Grönlund et al. 2020) has already been transferred to an online version. So, we might expect more experiences with online tools in more municipalities and regions which may encourage subnational governments to further use and develop these also after the coronavirus crisis.

The coronavirus crisis has also increased the mandate and power of local and regional governments to take decisions in the economic and social sphere. An open question is how quickly governments will be able to give back responsibilities to citizens again.

Notes

1.   In Switzerland and to a lesser extent Slovenia the same can be said for the national realms.
2.   See https://www.ffm.de/frankfurt/de/home (last accessed 1 March 2021).

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